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FACT SHEET

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Online Self-Help Center: Questions and Answers
www.courtinfo.ca.gov/selfhelp/

Centro de Ayuda de las Cortes de California
www.sucorte.ca.gov/

The California Courts Online Self-Help Center is the nation's most comprehensive court-sponsored source of legal information available on the Internet. The Judicial Council of California created the Online Self-Help Center to assist self-represented litigants and others wishing to become better informed about the law and court procedures. In July 2003, the council launched a Spanish-language version of the center, Centro de Ayuda de las Cortes de California. The Online Self-Help Center helps achieve the council's goal of ensuring meaningful court access for all Californians.

The Judicial Council, chaired by the Chief Justice, is the policymaking body of the California court system. The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), the council's staff agency, maintains the Online Self-Help Center.

What is the purpose of the Web sites?

California courts are seeing a surge in self-represented litigants, a trend that shows no sign of abating. The California Courts Online Self-Help Center and Centro de Ayuda de las Cortes de California provide the kinds of legal information sought most by self-represented litigants. The Web sites are designed to help those without attorneys become better informed, navigate the court system with more success, and have more realistic expectations about the legal system. Although a wealth of legal information and resources is provided, the sites do not interpret the law, predict results, or provide legal advice on individual cases.

Why are the sites important?

Self-represented litigants often are disadvantaged in court because they are unfamiliar with court procedures and forms, as well as with their rights and obligations. Most

Californians (76 percent) use a computer at home, work, or school, and 65 percent say they use the Internet. In addition, 25 percent of Californians speak Spanish at home, and 13.7 percent of Californians speak English “less well” than they do their native languages; a growing number of both populations is using the Internet.

The Online Self-Help Center and Centro de Ayuda de las Cortes de California give self-represented litigants quick access to comprehensive information about many basic court procedures, resources, referrals to legal services programs, lawyer referral services, and other assistance. The information provided is of a scope not available elsewhere.

What are some key features of the Web sites?

Both the English and Spanish versions contain more than 800 pages designed specifically to help self-represented litigants navigate the court system. Users of the sites can find out about free and low-cost legal assistance, alternative dispute resolution, bringing a lawsuit, filling out court forms, and locating additional resources and information. The sites also offer information about specific topics, including family law, domestic violence, juvenile law, guardianship, elder law, landlord-tenant issues, name changes, small claims, and traffic. The sites include many links to other useful Web sites.

Can a person ask specific questions?

All files in the Online Self-Help Center can be searched by word or phrase. But questions seeking legal advice or an interpretation of the law are beyond the scope of the assistance available from the Online Self-Help Center. The AOC welcomes comments, suggestions, and reports of technical problems and will use such feedback to improve the sites.

Can forms be filled out online?

All English-language Judicial Council forms can be filled out online at no charge. You can then print them, sign them, and file them with the court.

Who are self-represented litigants?

Without affordable access to legal services, more and more people are representing themselves in legal proceedings. A large proportion of self-represented litigants are poor, according to the National Center for State Courts. Others simply choose to proceed without an attorney when their cases do not appear to be complex. The needs of self-represented litigants vary with the circumstances of the case. Some need

an explanation of a simple procedure or assistance in completing court forms, while others may need more intensive and case-specific services related to the litigation process.

How many self-represented litigants are there?

According to data collected by the AOC:

- Most of the 6 million annual traffic filings involve self-represented litigants;
- All of the nearly 400,000 annual small claims filings involve self-represented litigants;
- Of the estimated 94,500 child custody mediation cases handled by California courts each year, at least half involve one or more self-represented parents;
- Fewer than 16 percent of child support cases involve parents who both are represented by attorneys, and in more than 63 percent of child support cases, neither parent has representation;
- Ninety-seven percent of proceedings processed through the local child support agencies involve at least one self-represented parent; and
- A significant number of self-represented litigants are native Spanish speakers.

What does the law say about representing yourself in court?

California law does not require an adult court user to be represented by an attorney. In small claims cases, the law expressly prohibits a litigant from having an attorney.

What help has been available in California in the past?

The Judicial Council and the courts, as well as bar associations and legal services offices, have developed a variety of assistance programs. A companion fact sheet, entitled “Programs for Self-Represented Litigants,” summarizes these programs.

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